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ABSTRACT

American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students regularly face obstacles during the transition to high school and have the highest dropout rate of all U.S. racial and ethnic groups. Educational theorists and researchers have various explanations for this high failure rate, each with its own prescriptions. These explanations include: (1) deficit theory focused on presumed "deficits" of individuals and families; (2) organizational theories focused on structure and practices of schools and school systems; (3) critical theory, emphasizing powerful economic and political structures that create winners and losers; (4) sociolinguistics, examining miscommunication between students and teachers from different cultures; and (5) cultural difference theories that focus on teacher adaptations of curriculum and methods to student needs. The idea of cultural discontinuity between home (or community) and school contains elements of the latter two explanations, and suggests that minority group children may have to choose between school and home cultures. School failure may be actively pursued in order to preserve the student's culture of origin. Two case studies contrast the failure of Canadian Sioux students who transferred from a reservation school to a city high school, with the success of Alaska Native students in small village high schools. Addressing discontinuity via culturally relevant curriculum is only a partial solution. Other concerns for AI/AN students are large schools, uncaring or untrained faculty, passive teaching methods, inappropriate testing, student retention, tracking, lack of parental involvement, and high transfer rate between schools. (SV)

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DROP-OUT RATES AMONG AMERICAN INDIAN AND ALASKA NATIVE STUDENTS: BEYOND CULTURAL DISCONTINUITY

ERIC Digest

By
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Drop-out Rates Among American Indian and Alaska Native Students: Beyond Cultural Discontinuity

Richard St. Germaine

ERIC DIGEST

ALTHOUGH THE transition to high school poses difficulties for all students, American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students regularly face additional obstacles that can impede their progress in school. Indeed, according to a recent study, 25.4 percent of AI/AN students who should have graduated in 1992 dropped out of school—the highest percentage of all racial/ethnic groups in the U.S. (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994, p. 34). Educational theorists and researchers have provided various explanations for this high failure rate, each with its own set of prescriptions. Recently, much attention has focused on cultural discontinuity. This Digest suggests that addressing cultural obstacles is an important but incomplete approach to increasing AI/AN students' success.

What Theorists Suggest

The diversity of the AI/AN community, as well as the great contrast between the urban and rural circumstances of Native people, makes it difficult to generalize the reasons for the high drop-out rate of AI/AN students. McLaughlin (1994) summarized various theories developed to explain *minority language* learners' failure to thrive in existing school systems. These theories may provide ideas for understanding dilemmas faced by AI/AN youth.

Education psychologists have focused on the individual learner who, they believe, arrives at school broken by impoverishing home and community experiences. This *deficit theory* calls for helping individual students acquire mastery of skills before moving ahead, as well as providing enrichment to overcome deficits in background experiences.

Organizational theorists have focused on schools and school systems, which they see as the primary culprits in school failure. These *school effectiveness* proponents call for school restructuring and systemic reform efforts, including rethinking such important issues as how time is used and who is involved in planning and decision making.

Sociologists and *anthropologists* have focused on powerful economic and political structures that underpin all aspects of society and "create arrangements . . . that systematically give voice to some and deny it to others" and are structured "around successful and unsuccessful competence displays such that winners and losers are inevitable" (McLaughlin, p. 53). These *critical theorists* call for teachers as coaches, pedagogy as problem solving, and a curriculum that addresses important themes connected to the lives of students.

Lastly, *sociolinguists* have a narrower focus on the teacher-learner interaction, where they find constant miscommunication resulting from different cultural and linguistic preferences for interaction. *Cultural differences theorists* believe solutions lie in teachers becoming knowledgeable about the culture and language of their students and adapting curriculum and teaching methods to students' needs.

The idea of *cultural discontinuity* contains elements of both of the last two theories just described. Increasingly, it has become an explanation for the difficulties AI/AN students face in adjusting to and finishing high school. Cultural discontinuity theory was originally applied in relation to urban minority groups. But it also has been applied to rural minorities, including rural AI/AN students.

Frequently in rural areas, there is little interaction between neighboring Native and majority cultures. Rural AI/AN students often attend small community or reservation schools in which they constitute the majority, if not the entirety, of the student population. In the transition to middle school or high school, however, many AI/AN students experience the reverse: They become a minority in schools that are predominantly White, with many AI/AN students experiencing their first prolonged contact with another culture.

Cultural Discontinuity: The Clash of Cultures

Theories of cultural discontinuity have their origins in the anthropological studies of ethnic minority groups within a dominant, majority culture. According to students of cultural discontinuity theory, minority children, having been initially raised in a distinctive culture of their own, are often thrust into a school system that promotes the values of the majority culture—not those of their own. If the resulting clash of cultures continues, the minority child may feel forced to choose one culture at the expense of the other. A tragic paradox emerges: Success (in school) becomes failure (in the community), and failure becomes success. Moreover, it has been argued that failure is not simply the passive act of neglecting to complete required tasks, but that it may be a status that is actively pursued by ethnic minority students in order to preserve their culture of origin. In other words, failure in school is a tacit cultural goal that must be achieved (McDermott, 1987; Spindler, 1987).

Two Contrasting Case Studies

Cultural discontinuity. In a study by Wilson (1991), Canadian Sioux students attended a reservation school through the elementary grades and were then bused to a city high school to complete grades 10 through 12. While in the reservation school, the students were described as having high expectations, as being attentive and interactive with teachers, and as having received good test scores and grades. But upon entering the large, predominantly White high school, they faced racial prejudice, isolation, low expectations of teachers, and a "structure [which] appeared to them to have been designed for their failure, and they failed, practically overnight" (p. 371). Of the 23 reservation students who were enrolled in the high school when the study began, 18 dropped out.

The study attributes much of the failure rate of Sioux students to cultural discontinuity, sometimes racist in nature. In the reservation classrooms, small groups of students were observed sitting at circular tables with the teacher moving freely about the room, making contact with

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students. In comparison, the high school classrooms had students facing forward toward the teacher, who interacted with only a few White students seated in front and virtually ignored the Indian students congregated in the back. The study examined the school buildings for signs of cultural difference. The circular reservation school (designed by an Indian architect to symbolize the circle in Indian spirituality) stood in contrast to the rectangular city high school.

Cultural continuity. Reyhner (1992a) indicated the need for K-12 day schools, particularly in certain Native communities, and points to the success of small village high schools in Alaska. As a result of a lawsuit filed on behalf of 126 village communities, the state of Alaska has provided small village high schools to Native peoples since 1976. Previously, Native students traveled far from home to attend boarding schools. While small village high schools have advantages in keeping students close to home and providing a caring learning environment, they have definite limitations in course variety, the number of advanced courses and extracurricular activities offered, and exposure to the world outside the village. The village high school has not solved all problems, but, in terms of high school completion, it seems to have been successful. The graduation rates of rural Alaskan high school students now exceed the national average (Kleinfeld, 1985).

Is Cultural Continuity the Answer?

While it seems clear that cultural discontinuity plays a major role in AI/AN student failure, some researchers caution that this theoretical construct may be too narrow (Foley, 1991; Ogbu, 1987; Trueba, 1988; 1991). They argue that the research ignores "macrostructural variables," and further claim that "there is overwhelming evidence that economic and social issues . . . not culturally specific to being Indian (although they may be specific to being a minority) are very significant in causing students to drop out of school" (Ledlow, 1992). Researchers question why cultural discontinuity has a greater impact on some students than on others. Pointing to evidence showing that Indian students from the most traditional homes seem to have the least trouble in school, some researchers conclude that a "culturally non-responsive curriculum is a greater threat to those whose own cultural 'identity' is insecure" (Deyhle, 1989).

Addressing cultural discontinuity via the curriculum can thus be only a partial solution. Jon Reyhner (1992b) seems to have drawn from all of the theorists as he explored the issues of AI/AN education for the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force. The following is a summary of what he viewed as major problems involved in educating Indian youth, along with some suggested solutions.

Large schools. Restructure existing large schools, using the school-within-a-school concept. Limit the size of new schools, taking as much care as possible to avoid the large, comprehensive high school of more than 1,000 students.

Uncaring and untrained teachers and counselors. Encourage positive teacher-student interaction. Recruit more AI/AN teachers and ease restrictions that prevent qualified AI/AN individuals from teaching.

Passive teaching methods. Too often, the complaint is made by AI/AN youth that they are "bored out" of school. Active learning strategies should be employed, where students are encouraged to interact with peers, instructors, and their environment.

Inappropriate curriculum. Use a culturally relevant curriculum with materials designed for AI/AN students.

Inappropriate testing and student retention. Use testing to locate student weakness for the purpose of adjusting instruction, not to track students out of college preparatory programs. Avoid holding students back.

Tracked classes. Hold high expectations for all students. Tracking stigmatizes students and restricts them from more challenging and interesting material.

Lack of parental involvement. Increasing parental involvement reduces cultural discontinuity between home and school.

Finally, an additional concern is the **high transfer rate** of AI/AN students between schools. Many AI/AN students transfer between schools during the course of an academic year for a variety of reasons. This is possible because students have several options including public, federal day and boarding, and mission schools. Transferring creates difficulties for researchers in keeping track of Native students, but, so far, there is no conclusive proof that transferring is detrimental to their progress through school (Swisher & Hoisch, 1992). The issue needs further study, however, to determine both its cause and its effect on Native students' progress.

Conclusion

Cultural discontinuity is one of the obstacles AI/AN students face in completing a high school education, but it is certainly not the only one. Addressing cultural discontinuity by adjusting the curriculum, while helpful, cannot address larger socioeconomic issues affecting Native children. Ultimately, the cultural factor that may need the most attention to improve life prospects for AI/AN and other minority high school students is the conflict caused by maintaining societal arrangements that produce substantial poverty within a nation of affluence and concentrate such poverty in certain groups, including American Indians and Alaska Natives.

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